

OF SHRINES AND SACRED PLACES

# THE VENETIAN ISLAND OF ST. LAZARUS WHERE ARMENIAN CULTURE SURVIVED THE DIASPORA

Since 1717, St. Lazarus Island has been a deeply-revered center of Armenian culture in the world. Visitors to the exhibition "Armenia: The Imprints of a Civilization" (see January 2012 issue, p. 49) will want to make a pilgrimage to this shrine and sacred place, too. For without the foresight of the first abbot, Mekhitar, much of Armenia's cultural history would have been lost forever...

■ BY LUCY GORDAN



An aerial view of St. Lazarus Island and a view of the island's dock where visitors arrive and depart (though the color in the aerial view seems more golden than red, the two photos are of the same place). Below, a portrait of the monastery's founder, Abbot Mekhitar "The Comforter" (1676-1749)

The islands of Venice proper form a fish-shaped pendant for a necklace of the other 40 islands which dot the city's shallow and marshy lagoon created by the estuaries of three rivers: the Piave, the Brenta, and the Sile. About half the islands lie abandoned, while others house the municipal cemetery, sanitariums, mental hospitals, prisons, medieval churches, a luxury marina and hotel, and market gardens. Just a mile away, but still within distant sight of St. Mark's Square, is St. Lazarus Island, locally known as *San Lazzaro degli Armeni*, St. Lazarus of the Armenians, the long-revered shrine for Armenians and *literati*.

The monastery on St. Lazarus Island is a small, comfortable, well-kept, rather suburban sort of haven, with groves of cypresses, a neat little white campanile, an onion-shaped cupola, and arbors which, until recently, produced good table wine. There are terraces and waterside gardens famous for their roses and the colorful peacocks that roam the grounds. First settled as a Benedictine monastery, the island was a leper colony for several centuries during the Middle Ages (hence named for their patron saint) and then abandoned. Since 1717 it has been a refuge and the motherhouse to the Mekhitar Fathers, members of an independent Armenian order who observe the Eastern rites of the Roman Catholic Church.

The first Mekhitarist Fathers to arrive here were 17 in number, counting their bearded founder, Mekhitar ("The Comforter"). They had been expelled from their monastery in Modone in Greece

when ruthless Turkish invaders had overrun Morea (the Greek Peloponnese) in 1715. They sought refuge in Venice because a small but wealthy community of Armenians — the first foreign community to settle in Venice — had thrived here since the 13th century. The Venetian Senate had barred new religious orders from settling along the city's "downtown" canals, so it gave these newly-arrived exiles the desolate island of St. Lazarus as a place of shelter.

Extremely scholarly and wise beyond his 39 years, Abbot Mekhitar (1676-1749) supervised the building of their new monastery and the restoration of the crumbling lepers' church. He and his monks also reclaimed land from the surrounding waters and quadrupled the size of their tiny island to its present three hectares (about 7 acres). They also acquired productive agricultural lands on the mainland.

From his studies and from first-hand experience, the learned Mekhitar, who'd already had to flee from Istanbul to Modone, knew full well that the already centuries-long decimation of the Armenian nation would continue; its scholarship would be suppressed and its artistic energies emasculated, so he quickly set about making his *San Lazzaro* a repository of his nation's language, culture and religion. In fact, when Napoleon, a century later, closed down the monasteries of Venice during his conquest of the city and the lagoon, "the little corporal" made an exception for *San Lazzaro degli Armeni* because he believed it to be more a center of learning than a religious institution.

Today this monastery (tel. 011-39-41-5260104,



useful for confirming *vaporetto* or public water-bus and tour times, as they are subject to change) is one of the three foremost centers of Armenian culture in the world, the others being a monastery of the Mekhitarists in Vienna (another branch of the same order which broke away after Mekhitar's death) and the monastery of Echmiadzin near Yerevan in Armenia itself.

## THE ISLAND TODAY

To reach *San Lazzaro*, take the 20-minute ride on the no. 20 *vaporetto*, which leaves at 3:10 pm (return ride at 4:45 pm) from San Zaccaria, the Venetian church where Vivaldi composed most of his music including *The Four Seasons*. Every afternoon at 3:30, certified multilingual guides give tours of this special island at a cost of 6 euros per person. The first stop is Mekhitar's church, then a visit to Mekhitar's rooms, which still contain his personal possessions, followed by a glimpse of the monastery's two libraries.

The larger of the two, with frescoes by the Venetian painter Tiepolo, houses some 150,000 volumes. Its core collection is Mekhitar's personal library and 35,000 other priceless volumes and manuscripts. The other library's round building is unique for its 4,500 carefully conserved gold-illuminated medieval Armenian manuscripts. Both libraries are open only to scholars and by appointment.

Next stop is the museum of artifacts, which were either collected by the monks or received as gifts from Armenians donors worldwide. Displayed here are many fine paintings, but the collection's highlight is a fine Egyptian mummy, as well as a mummy coffin, both donated by Boghos Bey Yusufian (1775-1844), who beginning in 1826 was minister both of commerce and of foreign affairs in Egypt to Muhammad Ali Pasha al-Mas'ud bin Agha (1769-1849), regarded as the "founder of modern Egypt" because the dynasty he established would continue to rule Egypt until Abdul Nasser's revolution in 1952. Bey's mummy is very well preserved, with some of its teeth still intact and the rest carefully stowed away in a little linen bag. Some Egyptologists consider it the best-preserved in Europe. The mummy's coffin belonged to Prince Nehmekhet (c. 1000 BC), but ironically he is not the mummy (c. 1400 BC) as he is too tall to fit in the coffin!

Other gifts to the museum include manna (the biblical food eaten by the Israelites during their travels in the desert) in a box, a telescope trained through a window on the Campanile of St. Mark, a collection of books about the Armenian language in languages other than Armenian, a Buddhist ritual text found by an Indian Armenian in Madras, wooden carvings from Mount Athos in Greece (the center of Eastern Orthodox monasticism), Chinese carvings in ivory, a small armory of antique weapons, and a set of German medals cast by overzealous craftsmen, depicting the



Apse of the island's church.  
Below: ancient Egyptian sarcophagus.  
Bottom: a portrait of Lord Byron in Albanian dress



heads of British monarchs, including a fine portrait of "King" Oliver I! — Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), who was Lord Protector of England, Ireland, and Scotland, but never crowned.

## LORD BYRON

For the general public and literati, *San Lazzaro*'s main tourist attraction is the story of Lord Byron, the island's most famous pilgrim. Fiona MacCarthy, in her biography of the megalomaniacal 19th century English Romantic poet, *On Byron and Biography*, recounts Byron's arrival in Venice on Sunday, November 10, 1816 "after eating an inferior lunch in Mestre," as his diary notes. "Although Byron," writes MacCarthy, "did not at first see himself as settling in Venice, ... he became acclimatized and lingered for the next three years. The relative remoteness of Venice at that period offered a perfect refuge for a celebrity of damaged reputation."

Almost immediately the poet, anxious to keep busy during the daylight hours of the Venetian winter, decided to learn Armenian. In fact, MacCarthy tells us, "in the publisher John Murray's archive there is a small thick book bound in light brown leather with gold tooling. It is an Armenian-Italian dictionary, inscribed and dated by Byron 30 November 1816," the day he began his studies here.

Making the acquaintance of the kindly Mekhitarists, then 70 in number, Byron customarily rowed across to *San Lazzaro* three times a week to study the language. His teacher was Father Paschal Aucher, who had spent two years in England.

According to MacCarthy, Byron had several reasons for studying Armenian. The monks, who were exiles like the poet, appealed to him. The difficulty of Armenian, with its "Waterloo of an alphabet," was notorious and "he had found that his mind 'wanted something craggy to break upon.' To add to the complexity he studied the language in two versions; modern-colloquial and ancient liturgical Armenian." Moreover, having promised himself that he would turn devout when he turned 30, his expeditions to *San Lazzaro* "satisfied his intermittent yearning for the religious life." After all, Armenia was the first Christian state in the history of the world; its Mount Ararat was the landing-place of Noah's Ark; and the country was defined in Scripture as the original site of Paradise.

"As well as pursuing his Armenian studies," continues MacCarthy, "Byron was helping Father Paschal to put together an English-Armenian grammar. He did his best to interest John Murray in the commercial possibilities of this endeavor, asking him to investigate whether there were any Armenian types and letterpress available in Oxford or Cambridge."

Although by February 1817 Byron seems to have abandoned his studies and deserted *San*

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Lazzaro, preferring the uproarious festivities of Carnival in Venice, his spirit still haunts the island. It is evident in the trees he helped plant, the summerhouse in which he meditated, the desk at which he sat, the pen with which he wrote and the knife he used to cut the pages of his books. Full of admiration for the monks, Byron wrote that the monastery “appears to unite all the advantages of the monastic institution without any of its vices... the virtues of the brethren... are well-fitted to strike a man of the world with the conviction that ‘there is another and a better,’ even in this life.” He promised the monks that he would return “when his head ached a little less.”

Byron never did return, dying of the fever he contracted in Greece during their fight for independence from the Ottoman Empire.

Other famous writers who signed the monks’ visitors’ book include another famous English Romantic poet, Robert Browning, who lived his last years in Venice; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; and Marcel Proust.

### HAKOB “MEGHAPART”

A major cultural bond between Armenians and the city of Venice predates the foundation of *San Lazzaro* by two centuries. Here, in 1511, an Armenian named Hakob printed the first book ever in Armenian. *Ourbatagirk* (Friday Book) contains the prayer of the Patriarch Foca against natural calamities, a treatise on snakebites, and a text on the evil eye, including formulas for exorcism. Another volume printed by Hakob in 1512, *Aghtark* (Book of Horoscopes and Astronomy) is a volume of proverbs concerning the seasons, advice on aphrodisiacs and information about medicinal plants. Hakob went on to print another three titles: *Parzaytumar* (1512), a simplified calendar with a key for explaining dreams; *Patara-gatetr* or Missal (1513), and *Tagharan* (Song Book) (1513), an anthology of poems mostly on religious subjects. All five volumes are in *San Lazzaro*’s library, have the typographer’s logo D.I.Z.A. in Latin letters (its significance still undeciphered), and seem to be aimed at the sophisticated local Armenian market, not for export to the “homeland.”

Except that he printed these five books, we know little about Hakob. The fact that he called himself “Meghapart,” which means “sinner,” on one of his colophons indicates that he used the Armenian mother-tongue. In addition, the sophisticated contents of his texts seem to indicate that he was an Armenian bookseller or merchant who lived permanently in Venice.

### PILGRIM SPOTS BESIDES SAN LAZZARO

The first Armenians to arrive in Venice, and the few remaining today, lived near *Santa Croce degli Armeni* tucked away behind St. Mark’s Square on the *Calle degli Armeni* (Armenian’s Alley), which is quite hard to find. From the outside, it’s difficult to see that this strange little building is a church unless your eyes fall first on its little bell or cross above the door. Only open on Sunday morn-

ings for services officiated by the monks from *San Lazzaro*, originally it was the private residence of a wealthy Armenian merchant. The building, granted to the first colony of Armenians in Venice in the 13th century and enlarged in the 1600s, is the only small church in Venice still functioning regularly since the Middle Ages.

The third and last monument associated with Armenians in Venice is the *Palazzo Ca’ Zenobio*, built in 1690 in splendid Baroque style. In 1850, two wealthy Armenians from India, Mker-tich Murat and Edward Raphael, made donations to establish an Armenian College here for the study of Armenian as well as other languages. Centrally located in the *sestiere* (neighborhood) of *Dorsoduro*, at *Dorsoduro* 2586 along the *Rio* (canal) of *Santa Margherita*, it no longer serves as a center of higher learning, but rather as a not-recommendable budget hotel, yet still boasts a beautiful garden and a sumptuous 18th-century ballroom.

### POLYGLOT PRESS

The Armenians — primarily city-dwelling merchants, shopkeepers, financiers, moneylenders and pawnbrokers — already formed the oldest of the many foreign communities in Venice, centering on the tiny *Santa Croce degli Armeni* Church just around the corner from Saint Mark’s Square near the Church of *San Giuliano*. They had been firmly established by the beginning of the 1100s and their position consolidated even more firmly when Doge Marco Ziani, the grandson of Doge Sebastian Ziani (1172-78), who’d made a fortune in their country, left part of it in 1253 to establish an Armenian headquarters, “*Domum in qua manent Armeni*” in Venice. Thus, it is no surprise that almost two dozen typographers in Venice published almost 250 Armenian titles between 1513 and 1789, the year the Mekhitarists founded a press of their own on *San Lazzaro*.

For the following 200 years, the Mekhitarists’ press printed Armenian-related texts, predominantly religious, scholastic (grammars and dictionaries), historical, and literary, in 36 languages and 12 scripts which included Arabic, Aramaic, Armenian, Chaldean, Chinese, Ethiopian, Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, Latin, Russian, and Sanskrit. The books in Armenian kept the language alive, and those in other languages perpetuated the culture. Although an 18th-century press is still on display at the monastery, the printing hall has been silent since 1991. The forever-enterprising Fathers, however, still run their publishing house, *Casa Editrice Armena*. Like Hakob, they rely on local presses; but, unlike Hakob, sell exclusively to foreign markets, because today only about 2,500 Armenians live in all of Italy, one of the smallest communities in Europe.

### HERE COMES THE BRIDE

Should you want to form your own personal bond with *San Lazzaro*, it is possible to get married here, but only after you have tied the knot at home. Click on [www.serenissima-weddings.com](http://www.serenissima-weddings.com) and they can make all the arrangements for you. ○



An ancient Armenian manuscript. Below: an 18th-century printing press once in use by the Fathers and now on display in the monastery

